

Performance & Profits

ACHIEVING BUSINESS RESULTS THROUGH PEOPLE

Are You a Micromanager? Risks and Rewards.

By Stefanie Smith

Micromanager. We hear the word intoned with the same special feeling typically reserved for scaly, slithery creatures. But even if you suspect the label might fit, take heart. Micromanagement isn't an incurable disease or permanent condition. It's often a symptom of having lost control and suffered the consequences. Micromanaging doesn't always derive from a character flaw. In fact, it may reflect the opposite – diligence and commitment to delivering on quality standards.

As an executive consultant-coach, I am engaged in developing leadership styles that empower individuals and organizations. But a recent experience caused me to confront my own perspectives on micromanagement and look a little deeper.

I was asked to moderate a private equity panel event for the Business Law Society of a prestigious Manhattan law school. The speakers were recognized experts from Goldman Sachs, Milbank Tweed and other firms. Working with graduate students rather than corporate event management professionals required more on my part than I anticipated. "To do" items second nature to me, such as online registration, name tag printing, advance conversations with each panelist and signage, were new to them. So, I found myself drilling down to a management role where I was issuing task orders rather than creating a vision and allowing others to fill in the details.

Here's the catch – it was not only necessary, but tremendously appreciated. Everyone involved recognized that my deeper involvement led to a more polished event. At the reception, all of the panelists expressed positive impressions of the organization. The students were beaming. They were pleased not only because of the quality of that evening, but because they raised their standards for the future of their program. I micromanaged and everyone won.

So let's take a fresh look at a practice that gets a really bad rap.

What are the risks?

There are three major downsides:

1. **Micromanaging keeps your head down rather than allowing you to gaze ahead.** It locks in your time and keeps you anxious. You diminish your freedom because you are constantly checking up, which takes substantial energy.

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2. **Your team won't become adept at making independent decisions.** Micromanaging conveys a lack of confidence in your team and your own ability to lead rather than manage. It's a vicious cycle. If people are treated as if they can't make their own decisions, they start believing it.
3. **If you step away from work, progress stops dead.** When you are out of the office for lunch or out of the country for a vacation, do you want your team to be motivated and move forward without you? Or do you need the power of knowing nothing gets done if you aren't there to make sure?

And the rewards.

Of course, there are rewards of micromanaging. Otherwise, why would we do it?

1. **You know exactly what is happening at all times.** There are fewer surprises, and you can intervene faster when someone is going down the wrong path.
2. **Project-specific micromanagement is an empowering alternative to structured training.** You can train an individual or a group to do something well that they've never done before. In this way, you can still delegate and get more done than you could do on your own.
3. **Your build trust with your staff.** People are less anxious about testing new skills when they know you are closely involved. One successful skill transfer leads to another. So you bring them up the learning curve with positive results along the way.

Where is the threshold between hands-on, detail-oriented management and getting in your own way? To self diagnose – ask yourself:

Are you talking or discussing?

Imagine that like a football coach, you are “watching the tapes” of your latest team or one-on-one meetings. Are people passively listening or pumped up by the prospect of surpassing a challenge? How did the number of minutes you talked, explained and instructed compare with the number of minutes you asked, listened, and responded?

You can spend 30 minutes explaining goals and standards, or you can spend those same 30 minutes asking and responding to questions. For example, “What would you need to do to develop a comprehensive plan for the upcoming product launch?” From there, “OK, sounds good, but what about involving the PR firm earlier on?” And then, “When would you like to review your initial draft with me, so I can answer any questions, approve the budget and you can proceed quickly?”

- **Focus on receiving, not giving information to learn more than expected about the tasks at hand.** Lou Holtz, one of the winningest football coaches in NCAA history, said, “I never learn anything talking. I only learn things when I ask questions.”

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- **Aim for big-picture lasting results.** Verbalize your confidence in others to increase their self-esteem and motivation. Building their ability to think strategically benefits everyone way past the current initiative.

Are you telling people what to do or teaching them to do it?

It may seem like a good time investment to spend an hour explaining how to draft a sensitive memo, approach a client call, or develop a presentation. But are you telling or teaching? Once, while I was doing an organizational review, a press relations manager complained his boss had corrected twelve drafts of a press memo. Twelve! You can imagine the frustration that had built up on both sides.

If you find yourself explaining the same thing over and over, switch gears. Perhaps you weren't getting your message across. Perhaps the person was resisting the message. At some point, it just doesn't matter. At some point, it's more valuable and less time consuming to sit down and do it together. As an added bonus, you kick start the initiative rather than remaining at the discussion stage. **Actions speak louder than words, and are more profitable.**

When I teach professionals to write status reports, it requires me to review and correct the reports for weeks, until they hone the style to make it most valuable to readers. But they learn a practice that permanently benefits themselves, their boss, and their organization. I taught an executive to do C-level status reports 6 years and 2 career moves ago. To this day, he thanks me for revitalizing his career and how he views his role. Since then, we've moved on to higher and more lucrative challenges.

- **Model good practices to your team rather than explaining them.** Think of ways to demonstrate proper techniques collaboratively rather than lecturing. Sit down side by side to prepare for a conference call or meeting. Or, draft a document and have your subordinate edit it so he or she takes responsibility for the final product and gains insight into your role.
- **Ask your team for feedback on how you can actively contribute to their professional development.** They may surprise you with their answers. Make sure you surprise them with your positive response. If you know what they want to learn, you can accomplish their goals and yours simultaneously.

Is your team meeting benchmarks, or blowing past them?

Employees managed and measured to comply with targets, will usually meet them. **Employees fired with creativity and satisfaction will exceed those targets.**

- **Manage for outcomes not processes.** Reward employees for asking questions and raising issues to streamline success and troubleshoot setbacks. Set short term goals and meet frequently to maintain a sense of continual achievement.
- **Solicit suggestions about increasing our own impact.** Meet with your team and simply ask, "How could I free up 20% of my time?" The answers may be valuable, or not. But chances are, you will hear some ideas for rechanneling your time towards exceeding objectives rather than worrying about them.

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Is your need to micromanage really your need to clarify communication?

The only cure for micromanagement is airtight communication. If instructions or priorities are not clear, you won't feel comfortable giving up control. If something goes awry, you'll waste precious time and energy debating who meant what...and cleaning up the mess.

- **Say it loud and clear.** Verbally acknowledge your new approach of training your team for greater future independence. Even if you've never done it before, you can now. Be receptive to input and ready to weather pent up complaints. Don't apologize too much. Simply explain why and how you plan to change your communication and management styles.
- **Get it in writing.** Having written deliverables and deadlines is your best tool to counter the micro-management impulse. Review a game plan with your direct reports biweekly. Your employees should arrive at each meeting with their written updated status against defined goals. Your role is to provide answers, advice and guidance. Then leave them the space to succeed.

Are you choosing your management style for you, for individuals or a group?

Micromanaging is sometimes in the eye of the beholder. What one employee considers interfering, another employee might consider welcomed attention from the boss. Look in the mirror and look at your team. Who or what is truly driving your tendency to micromanage? Depending on the answers:

- **Micromanage selectively.** Your management styles can vary according to individual needs and preferences. You can micromanage some rather than all, as long as your motivations are clear to all parties.
- **Modify, don't change, your style.** What is the longest you can go without checking in with your direct reports? Between scheduled meetings, calls or status updates, who calls or emails first? Challenge yourself to increase the time by 10% this month. Then absorb the results and see where you go from there.

When is it appropriate to micromanage?

Micromanagement isn't synonymous with bad management. It has a purpose and place when:

- **Players do not have the maturity to maintain progress or initiate a remedy on their own if a snag occurs.** Are they inexperienced? Will they gain competence within a reasonable timeframe? Can you adjust their role to enable them to succeed independently today while training for more advanced responsibilities tomorrow?

If they don't have what it takes to evolve and you don't want to micromanage forever, you may need to permanently redesign their role, or accept the fact you will have to replace them.

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- **The stakes are high and people are learning new skills.** No one wants to incur negative consequences – financial or otherwise. This could occur in many fields – healthcare, science, construction, or portfolio management.
- **You are put in charge of a group you didn't hire or known to be problematic.** In a major hospital a new manager was put in charge of the cancer laboratory reporting unit. The union shop was negotiating for higher compensation, and was known to purposely misfile reports and delay deliveries to sabotage operations and strengthen their position, knowing the manager would take the heat. Two previous managers had given up. The new manager fired two people within the first three weeks and laid down the law, "You aren't damaging me, you are hurting innocent children, elderly people, and patients in critical condition. I'm going to enforce the rules and watch every one of you every minute until this stops". Which it did.

If you decide to micromanage, own the choice and enjoy the results

Have you tested your motivations, but feel you'll need to keep micromanaging? Then be secure in your decision. Either way, two final tips to support your advancement:

- **Deploy micromanaging as a tactic, not a strategy.** You may opt to micromanage during an interim period, but state the reasons. For example, "Until we work out the kinks in our new medical testing procedures, I'm going to keep a close eye on the process because I want to troubleshoot errors immediately. But after we analyze the first three months of data together, and we are comfortable with the results, I will delegate more responsibility to you."
- **Remain open to recommendations for increasing efficiency, morale, or performance.** Inspiring others to make strategic contributions builds mutual confidence and expands their abilities, which just may enable you to rise to a higher level leadership style.

If you would like to share your thoughts and experiences, please [contact me](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Stefanie Smith leads Stratex, an executive consulting and coaching firm based in Manhattan. As an executive consultant, she works with business and nonprofit leaders to plan and execute strategic projects. Stefanie also provides customized workshops and private coaching programs to help executives and their teams quickly reach the next performance level. For more information, see www.stratexcoaching.com, speak with her directly, or subscribe to her blog at www.coachstef.com.